

Obsolete Opinion, or Forgetting Yesterday's Future

Editorial

[Jett Rucker](#)

One of my favorite things about b&bs is the books one finds in the great majority of them. These books aren't today's best-sellers; they might not even have been best sellers in their own day. Like books in general, most of them are rubbish, and/or, being fiction, are of little interest to me. But some of the books are non-fiction, and many of them, in turn, concern history. As I said, these books may never have commanded much notice in their own day, but it remains that each of them was at least important enough to its author to take the trouble to write it, and further that each of them was promising enough to its publisher to merit the not-inconsiderable effort of publishing them. So there is a bare minimum of note that can be ascribed to even the most-obscure of these, and others may have commanded a great deal of credence despite being themselves, as they say, "in the dustbin of history"—or relegated to the dusty shelves of b&bs that may indeed have purchased them by the yard for mere decoration.

I was stunned, for example, to read an account in *Larner's World History's* chapter on Austria-Hungary that Emperor Franz-Joseph of Austria had just sustained the third sudden loss of a family member to death by gunshot: the heir to his throne Archduke Ferdinand, assassinated in Sarajevo while on a state visit. Since he had lost his wife, the Empress Elisabeth, to an assassin in 1898, and his son Crown Prince Rudolf in 1889 in a suicide, this account primarily sympathized with the presumably lonely old emperor in Vienna, the while not bothering to belabor the longer-term implications even on the succession to the Austro-Hungarian throne.

Wait a minute! I shouted in my head. What about World War I and all that? Hadn't the tragic assassination started World War I? What kind of history was this? I leafed quickly to the book's front matter (it was in fact one of five volumes, so limitation of space wasn't an explanation) and found my answer: the year of publication was 1914. Our historian was, after all, not a fortune-teller; he thought the Sarajevo incident was most unfortunate for Franz-Joseph, and that was about all that occurred to him by press time. Today, of course, we all "know" that the event sparked a chain of events that became something first called the Great War, and later became the first in a woeful numbered series that presently stands at Two.



Gavrilo Princip was a Bosnian Serb who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. His act resulted in events that left over 17 million dead. Work is in Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Unlike many historical cause-and-effect sequences, the one linking Gavrilo Princip's murderous 1914 deed to the fall of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires seems little contested even from the time of its first description, no doubt well before the end of the conflict itself in 1918. In its broad outlines it is, if not outright obvious, at least unambiguous and easily described in plausible detail. So, mightn't we have expected Historian Lerner to have had, and voiced, some premonition at least as to the possible catastrophic consequences of Sarajevo? Well, he didn't, and I have no reason, from reading the rest of his work, to feel he is in any way inferior to the general run of historians, then or now. Rather the contrary, in fact—his hindsight, never a thing to belittle the value of—seemed to be superior not only to the historiography of his day, but in many ways to today's renditions of many of the same subjects.

Everyone contemplating things done in the past is hampered by knowledge—accurate and otherwise—of things that were done since, even in the same places and/or by the same people, and the “arrow of

time,” as it is called, can get reversed after enough hours of contemplation of ancient causes and effects, perceptions and motivations, superstitions and fears, and inspirations and hopes. One regularly encounters phrases in careless—or deceitful—writing such as “with World War II looming less than a month away.”

What World War II? Like what has been called World War I for my entire life (of seventy years), World War II didn’t even acquire its name (and number) until almost three years after the date it is now said to have begun in Europe. Even calling that unpleasant interlude “World War II” is revisionist; it was no such thing before December 1941. And the Great War didn’t get *its* number until that late time.

All history is revisionism, and all revisionism is a relentless search for Clio’s prize, *context*. And context, most-obviously, and most-easily overlooked, does not include knowledge or even, typically, fear of events later seen to have occurred in the time since the events being studied. It is, of course, often the subsequent events that inspire interest in the subject events in the first place. The shooting of Archduke Ferdinand would remain a footnote in Lerner’s *History* but for subsequent events that have, apparently to everyone’s satisfaction, been firmly connected to the shooting. But Princip, and Ferdinand, and Lerner, and most of the rest of those aware of the incident in the first place, knew not one iota of the vast and horrible history we now all command of World War I.

Putting all that out of your mind when contemplating what happened in Sarajevo in 1914 is nonetheless utterly essential for evaluating the things that did happen later, both in consequence and having their origins other places entirely, such as the trade rivalries between Germany and Great Britain, or the ambitions of the young First Sea Lord Winston Churchill. Yet it is practically superhuman to be able to do so. Sitting in a b&b and stumbling across Lerner’s blinkered account of the Austrian royal family’s misfortunes is the sort of shot between the eyes that can bring one up, at least momentarily, face-to-face with both the importance of forgetting yesterday’s future and the impossibility of ever succeeding in doing so.

One thing that might spur one’s efforts to better perform the insuperable task is the awareness that most historical “connections” are in fact reverse-engineered speculations inspired not only by the historian’s predilections and limitations of data but further and often more-forcefully, by what the historian may sense—consciously or not—would best advance his career in the great imbroglio of prejudice, ignorance and fear in which ultimately his conclusions will be received. Historians and others voicing unpopular conclusions have in the past lost far more than “just” their jobs and their families.

An intrepid Israeli blogger named Rafi Farber recently [aired his well-founded musings](#) to the effect that the war waged against Germany from 1939 to 1945 to a great extent actually *caused* what now is described in six million different ways as “the Holocaust.” Farber’s country is one of many in which “Holocaust denial” is a crime; that some zealot would charge him with that crime for his proposition lies well within my imagination. His “armor” against such attacks includes not only that he is an observant Jew who made *aliyah* from the United States, but further that he does not claim to be a historian and accordingly is not subject to the institutional pressures that bear on virtually every historian in the world who enjoys the advantage of drawing a salary.

But Farber’s vital insight, long widely accepted to at least some degree by revisionists who have considered the events in question, relies on yet another shibboleth that lies even outside Clio’s legendary trove of historical treasures: *counterfact*—the construction of answers to the question, “What

if *not*?" Without counterfact, unconsciously assumed or carefully assembled, causation is impossible to infer. Farber's spectacular (in view of where he aired it from and who he is) feat entailed a scrupulous analysis of things that did *not* happen: what if Britain and France had not declared war on Germany when Germany's *Wehrmacht* took back from Poland, lands in which numerous Germans had lived for many centuries? Obviously, there is no way surely to know these things, and such a truism might deter people from believing that one *can* know and fully understand things that *really did* happen.

Well, such uncertainties are no deterrent at all to historians who understand that, even in those rare cases where it is fully understood what *really did* happen, what remains unknowable still (who did it, why did they do it, what else was done, and by whom?) is so extensive and profound that no more certainty actually inheres in "the past" than might inhere in the non-past.

History (i.e., revisionism) is no hobby for the intellectually faint-hearted. Without bold, even daring, imagination, the entire subject disintegrates into the dry dust that we all rightly paid no attention to in school, and have quite forgotten to our everlasting benefit. It isn't easy, it isn't simple, it usually isn't pretty, and it can be quite dangerous.

And it isn't even really fun. It's much, much better than that.

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